

it's you i can't replace by jellyfishes

Series: [The Snowball \[2\]](#)

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Summary:

Things haven't been the same between Will and Mike since the Snowball.

it's you i can't replace

Author's Note:

I'm back with part two! This was way more difficult for me to write than the first one, mostly because of El. I love her, but damn is she hard to write.

If you haven't read part one, you'll probably have no idea what's going on, so I would highly encourage it. Thank you for reading!

If El hadn't shown up at the Snowball, maybe Mike would've realized earlier that Will asked him to the Snowball as his *date*, not his friend, and maybe he would've danced with Will like he meant it, and maybe everything would have ended differently.

He didn't mean to push Will away, but he did. He's calling out, "El?" before he can stop himself, weaving through slow dancing couples until he's standing in front of her. He has no idea what to say or do or *think*.

"Mike," El whispers.

She pulls him into a crushing hug, burying her face in between his shoulder and neck. He takes a deep breath, catching the scent of strawberries in her hair. "I can't believe you're here," he murmurs. "I called you every night, every night—I only stopped because I thought you weren't listening."

"I was," El says, pulling back. Mike's vision has gone a little blurry. "I heard."

Mike wants to ask where she's been, why she never responded, but there's already a large number of people staring at them, and he doesn't think he wants the whole school to see him crying tonight. So he stays silent, reveling in the feeling of having El back.

"Do you want to dance?" Mike asks.

El nods, but whispers, "I don't know how."

“It’s okay,” Mike laughs. “Neither do I.”

He takes her hand, and then— *Shit* .

“Wait, I—” he drops her hand, searching the room for Will. He isn’t where Mike left him, and he isn’t by the punch, and he isn’t with Dustin and Nancy or Lucas and Max. “I have to find Will.”

El nods, although she couldn’t possibly know why he needs to find him, or why it’s so urgent.

It’s starting to hit him all at once. The drawing Will gave him, special and personal and sweet. The way he’d been so excited when Mike agreed to go with him. How badly he wanted to dance to the stupid slow song.

He’s Will’s *date* . And he ditched him right in the middle of their dance.

El follows him as he does a loop around the gym. He doesn’t bother asking anyone if they’ve seen him—Will is quiet and sneaky, and very good at hiding. He ends up right back where he started, with El growing increasingly more confused.

“Will is missing?” she asks.

Mike shakes his head slowly. “No, not *missing* , missing. I just lost him.”

I just lost him . Mike hopes that isn’t the truth.

“I can find him,” El says.

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El doesn’t ask him any questions, although she doesn’t do a very good job at hiding the disappointment on her face. Mike doesn’t blame her—not only did he ruin Will’s night, but El’s too.

The only sound is the distant thumping of the music far away, until the AV room is enveloped in static noise. El ties a piece of fabric over her eyes, something she’d found in one of the drawers.

"I'm sorry," Mike says quietly. "I doubt this is what you wanted to do tonight."

"Stop talking," El commands, but her lips quirk into a small smile.

In less than a minute, El is calmly taking off the blindfold and turning off the radio, washing the room in silence. "Will is safe," she says. "With someone called Steve. They seem like friends."

"He's with Steve?" Mike asks redundantly. Steve must have been waiting to pick up Dustin, and Will must have been desperate to get home. *Shit, shit, shit*. Belatedly, he says, "Thanks, El."

She shrugs, and then gives him a meaningful look. "Why is Will sad?"

Mike knows he can trust her, but he's not sure how he can tell El how he's feeling without hurting her. "I don't know."

"Friends don't lie," El says lowly, her face pinched. In sadness or anger, he isn't sure.

"I just—I really messed up, okay?" Mike breathes, sliding down the wall and sitting on the floor. El follows, tentatively taking his hand. He stares at the way their hands are different sizes now. A lot has changed, he realizes. He's not even sure they're the same people anymore.

"You were dancing," she says offhandedly. "When I came in."

"Yeah," Mike says, still staring at their hands. He rubs his thumb over the top of her hand and then untangles them, clasping his own hands together in his lap. "I missed you a lot, El. I—"

"It's okay," she says. She couldn't possibly know what she's talking about. She only caught a glimpse of Will and Mike, not long enough to know what was going on.

"Will asked me to the Snowball," Mike says. El deserves to know the truth. "And I—I didn't know it was a date. But then you came in and, and, that's why Will is sad."

El frowns at the floor. "But you promised we would go to the

Snowball.”

“Yeah, I did, I know,” Mike says, his heart sinking. “El, you were gone for a long time, a really long time. We didn’t know if you would ever come back—Please don’t be mad at Will.”

“I’m not mad,” El says. Mike nearly forgot how few words she speaks—not because she doesn’t know the words, only because she doesn’t need as many. “I like Will.”

“You do?”

El nods.

“Will likes you too, I think,” Mike says. “He likes to hear stories about you.”

She smiles. “You like Will.”

Mike squints and says, “Well sure, he’s my best friend.”

“You like Will,” she repeats.

“As a friend,” Mike insists.

“You *like* Will,” El repeats.

Mike stares at her, unblinking, for so long that his eyes start to water. Or maybe that’s something else. “No I don’t.”

“Friends don’t lie,” she says, sounding almost teasing.

Mike thinks about the way he felt watching Will’s limp body being pulled out of the lake—it might not have been him, but in that moment, nothing could have possibly hurt him more. He thinks about seeing El sacrifice herself to save them all, disappearing in the fragments of the demogorgon’s body. He thinks about Will being tied up in the shed, trapped somewhere inside his own body. He thinks about the gate closing, *knowing* that it was Eleven who did it, but unsure where she ended up after.

He can’t imagine a life without either of them.

"I'm sorry I ruined everyone's night," Mike says, instead of addressing the soul-crushing realization that he might *possibly* have a thing for his best friend.

"You didn't," El says, but Mike knows she must be lying. *Friends don't lie*, sure.

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"Nancy, how did you know you wanted Jonathan and not Steve?"

Nancy chokes on her glass of water. "What?"

Mike tries to keep his eyes on her and make himself look casual and curious, not unnerved and scared. "I mean, like, I mean—You loved both of them, right?"

Nancy narrows her eyes. "And *why* are you asking me this?"

"Just answer it, please," Mike begs.

She sets her glass down, humming. "Steve wanted everything to go back to normal. Especially with Barb... It was like he just wanted to forget it ever happened, but I couldn't forget. And Jonathan never tried to make me. I love them both, but it was never really a question."

Mike sighs, looking out the window. That's not helpful at all. Neither Will nor El have ever tried to forget what has happened to them. How could they even try?

"If you're asking me whether you should go out with Eleven or Will, I don't think I can answer that."

Mike whips his head, staring at her with wide eyes. "How did you know that?"

Apologetically, Nancy says, "Jonathan told me that Will asked you to the dance as more than friends."

Mike groans. Apparently everyone knew the truth before he did.

“Hey, Mike?” Nancy says, her face turning more serious. “Will has always been there for you, always. Even if you don’t, well, *pick* him, don’t let it ruin your friendship.”

Mike lets out a breath. “Course not.”

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Mike hasn’t spoken to Will alone since the Snowball, but not for lack of trying. Will dashes out of class as soon as the bell rings, ignores Mike’s entire existence within the party, and makes excuses to leave whenever Mike asks if they can talk.

The others catch on quickly, cornering Mike after an AV club meeting, while Will is in the bathroom.

“Man, what happened?” Lucas asks immediately after Will is out of sight. “Why doesn’t Will want to bike with you anymore?”

Since Joyce lifted the bike ban, it’s been an unspoken rule that Mike is always the one to make sure Will gets home safe after school. Since the Snowball, however, Will has been asking anyone except Mike to take him home. He even asked *El* to ride with him once, and she doesn’t know how to ride a bike on her own yet.

“It’s none of your business,” Mike says, avoiding their eyes.

“But you guys were fine at the dance!” Dustin says, Lucas and Max nodding in agreement. “Come on, Mike, we can’t help if you don’t tell us what happened.”

It would be easy, Mike thinks. He could lay it all out on the table and ask for their help, ask them to make his decisions for him, but he knows he can’t. It wouldn’t be fair to Will.

“I’m fixing it,” Mike says, sighing. “I promise.”

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In the end, Mike doesn’t make the decision, El does.

She rides on the back of his bike like old times, and stays silent the

whole way through. It's not unusual, her being quiet, but the serious expression on her face says she's preparing for something.

At the house, Mike's mom gives a short nod to El and tells Mike to leave the door open. It had taken a lot of explaining—and lying—to convince Mike's mom that El isn't a Russian spy who Mike harbored in their house. It helped that El has a birth certificate now and was legally adopted by the Chief of Police. Mike still catches her staring at El distrustfully sometimes, though.

El wastes no time once they're alone before letting him know exactly what she needs to say. "Will should be happy," she says matter-of-factly.

Mike doesn't know how to respond to that. Thankfully, El doesn't need him to.

"You should go to him."

"I don't know if—"

"You should be happy."

"El," he says, letting out a breath. " *You* should be happy too."

"I will be," El says with a short nod. "Promise."

Mike keeps his eyes on her for so long that it starts to grow uncomfortable before looking away. "Okay. Promise."

Everything feels a little too heavy, a little too much for Mike to know what to do. "But how am I supposed to—" He doesn't even finish his question before a plan starts to unfold in his head.

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"Lucas, are you there? I need your help," Mike says into the walkie talkie. He waits for Lucas to answer before saying, "Party meeting *without Will* in twenty minutes."

"Without Will?" Lucas repeats, incredulous.

“Just trust me.”

Lucas mutters something about him being a dick that Mike knows he doesn't mean, and then agrees. Mike paces around the basement while he waits for everyone else to arrive. They trickle in slowly, each person more confused than the last.

“Why without Will?” Max asks, when everyone has *finally* joined them.

“I'm *about* to tell you,” Mike rolls his eyes, hoping that his annoyance overpowers the nervousness in his voice. He waits a moment, partially for dramatic pause and partially to wait for his heart rate to slow the hell down. “We're recreating the Snowball.”

“We're what?” Dustin asks.

“Recreating the Snowball,” Mike closes his eyes. “Because I need to fix things with Will, and that's where it all went wrong. It *needs* to be a surprise. If any of you tell him, I swear, I'll—”

“Why the Snowball?” Lucas interrupts. “You never even told us what happened.”

The encouragement in El's eyes when he glances at her emboldens him enough to say, “I want to, you know, go out with Will. Like you and Max, or, or Nancy and Jonathan. That's what Will wanted too, before—”

All at once, everyone tries to inconspicuously stare at El. She frowns.

“But me and El *talked*,” Mike says, regaining their attention. “And it's okay. Right, El?”

El nods, placating them.

Lucas still seems to be processing the information. “So you and... Will?”

Mike tugs on the sleeve of his sweater, fraying the threads at the end with his nervous fidgeting. “I mean, yeah.”

"I totally knew it," Dustin says.

"You did not," Lucas shakes his head.

"You didn't," Max agrees.

"But—it's okay, right?" Mike asks quietly. He knows the kinds of things people like them get called. He's heard them at school and from his dad and even on the news. He knows about the laws against it and he knows they can never *be* like Lucas and Max or Nancy and Jonathan, even if they tried. He knows that people like them get thrown out of their houses or abandoned by their friends or bullied worse than they could imagine. But he knows there are other people too, people who don't care whether Mike dates a girl or a boy. He can only hope that his friends are those people.

"What?" "Why would that—" "No way—" "That's crazy—"

They all fight with each other to speak the loudest, their voices a cacophony of love and outrage that Mike would even consider the idea that they would see a problem with him and Will.

Mike has to look at the floor to hide the blush coating his cheeks.

"Okay," he says authoritatively. "So here's the plan."

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The Wheeler's basement couldn't possibly be an exact copy of the Snowball, especially on their budget (which is just borrowed money from Nancy and a few cents cobbled together that would've gone towards the arcade), but Mike thinks they did a pretty damn good job, considering. There are streamers and balloons everywhere, Christmas lights draped across the ceiling—those, they didn't have to buy, since Jonathan is on board. There's a punch bowl for Nancy and a camera for Jonathan, and since El is there, Dustin will have someone his own age to dance with. Mike secretly thinks that their little Snowball will be a thousand times better than Hawkins Middle School's.

All that's left to do is for Jonathan to go pick up Will.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asks Mike when she spots him crouched over on a folding chair, his hands around his stomach.

He looks up, nodding slowly. "Just feel a little—sick."

Nancy laughs, stroking his hair. "It'll be fine. He's gonna love it."

Maybe it's her hand in his hair that makes his insecurities come tumbling out like vomit. "What if he doesn't? What if I'm too late? What if he didn't want everyone to know?"

"Hey, come on," she pulls up a chair next to him. "You can't think like that, Mike. You know what I do when I'm about to do something that scares me *shitless* ? I pretend I'm not scared. I pretend I know *exactly* what I'm doing."

"That works?" Mike asks.

Nancy shrugs. "Sure. Even if you don't feel any different, everyone else thinks you've got everything all figured out."

Mike laughs and then tries it. "Okay. Okay... I can do this. Will's gonna be here in a minute, and I'll ask him to dance, and he'll say yes."

"See, now you got it."

"And then I'll kiss him."

"Oh, wow," Nancy raises her eyebrows.

"What? Is it too soon?"

"Nah, I just didn't think you'd have the guts," she teases.

Mike doesn't get a chance to retort, because he hears the front door open upstairs, and then he's shooting out of his chair to pace around.

"Hey," Nancy says, pushing him in the arm. "Confidence, remember? You're not even scared right now."

"Right," Mike nods. "I'm not scared at all."

Mike turns the music on at the exact moment that Jonathan and Will start to walk down the stairs. The opening notes to Time After Time ring through the room as everyone gets into place.

“What’s th—”

Will’s voice cuts off when the basement comes into view, the streamers and the lights and everyone in their fancy clothes. Will is wearing his too, thanks to Jonathan.

“Will,” Mike says, waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

Will steps closer, his eyes wide. “What’s going on?”

If you’re lost, you can look and you will find me .

“I want to make things right. Will, do you, um, do you want to dance?”

Mike holds out a hand, holding his breath. *I’m not even scared right now .*

Will places his hand in Mike’s, a slow smile creeping over his face. He looks around at everyone dancing, pretending they aren’t staring at the two of them.

Mike pulls him close and places his hands on Will’s hips. Will wraps his arms around Mike’s neck and it feels so *right* that Mike doesn’t even feel scared anymore, truthfully this time. They sway to the song, their eyes never leaving each other.

If you fall, I will catch you, I’ll be waiting, time after time.

“You look—” Mike starts, and then laughs when he realizes he doesn’t know how to describe a boy. *Handsome* sounds like something a mom says to her son. “You look—”

“You too,” Will says softly, giggling. “This is really—”

“Nice,” they say in unison.

When Time After Time fades into Every Breath You Take, Will

glances around the room nervously.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Mike says. Will turns back to him, looking hopeful. A surge of emotion overtakes him, then, making his breath stutter and his heart race and his palms sweat. With it, comes confidence. “Can I kiss you?”

“Really?” Will asks, before blushing. “I mean—You—Yeah, yes.”

Mike hardly waits for him to finish before he leans forward and *goes for it*, catching Will’s breath between his lips. When he pulls back, he and Will can barely make eye contact because they feel so *much*, so giddy and happy and relieved.

“That was—”

“Nice,” they say together.

When everyone starts clapping and cheering simultaneously, Will buries his face in Mike’s chest and they laugh until their eyes feel wet.

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ONE MONTH LATER.

Mike hadn’t noticed that they were gone, at first.

It’s only when he turns to offer Will some of his soda that he realizes he’s not there. A quick sweep of the room shows that El isn’t either.

“Where did Will and El go?” Mike asks, interrupting a story Dustin was telling.

“Upstairs, El was hungry,” Max says. “Do you ever listen?”

Mike flips her off as he heads for the stairs. After seeing Max keep it together in the midst of being attacked by a hoard of demogorgons, he decided she was sort of alright, but it doesn’t stop them from bickering about anything and everything.

At the top of the stairs, Mike can see the kitchen light on. He doesn’t

mean to stop walking, he means to go and see if they need any help, but then—

“Are you happy?” It’s El’s voice.

Mike can imagine Will’s smile. It’s always somewhat sheepish, as if he doesn’t think he deserves to feel happy. He wants Will to be happy all the time.

“Yeah,” Will says. “I’m really happy. I, um—Are *you* happy?”

“Halfway happy,” El says, her voice soft. “Mike is happy, you are happy, so I’m halfway happy.”

Mike’s heart jumps in his chest, feeling the residual pangs of love he has for her. He always will. It’s just that he’s starting to love her in the way he loves Nancy rather than in the way he loves, well, Will.

“Mike really loves you,” Will says, and Mike can practically *see* the self deprecating smile he’s surely wearing. “That will never change.”

“I know,” El says.

There’s no more talking, then, only the crinkle of a chip bag, so Mike steps loudly on the top step and then casually walks into the kitchen. “Hey guys,” he says, reaching for the chips. “All good?”

They nod, so Mike nods back. “Um, my mom is making lasagna for dinner,” he comments, even though he already told them that when they first got here. “So, uh. Yeah.”

“You’re not good at pretending,” El says.

“Pretending?” Mike scoffs, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

“Friends don’t—”

“*Fine*, I heard you talking,” Mike says, pouting. “You can’t just say that every time you want me to tell you something. Why can’t I ever have any secrets?”

He’s rambling, he knows. He hopes they don’t get mad at him for

eavesdropping.

“Hey, Mike?” Will says, his face impassive. He waits for Mike to face him before he leans in and kisses him, only just long enough for Mike to taste the salt on his lips. “It’s all good.”

El nods in agreement, and there’s a twinkle in her eye.

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A few months later, Mike asks El if she’s still only halfway happy.

She turns and looks at him, surprised. “No,” she laughs. “I’m happy.”

“Good,” Mike says, sounding so relieved even to his own ears. “I’m happy too.”

Author's Note:

I hope you enjoyed! As of now, I think this will be the last part in the series, but I have some other ideas so we'll see. Either way, this won't be the last thing I'll write for Stranger Things, I'm having way too much fun.

As usual, comments literally make my day and are very, very appreciated! <3

You can also find me at my [stranger things blog](#), where I'm taking prompts!

Thank you all!